Two unconventional ways of thinking about the delay of the parousia

Andrew Perriman | 19 Feb 2016

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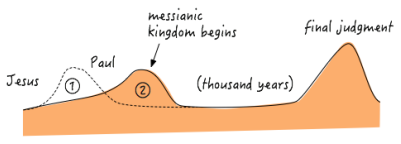
I have been getting a kick out of Albert Schweitzer's 1930 book *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*. What's so refreshing about the book is that Schweitzer attempts consistently to frame Paul's thinking eschatologically. The book's dated in many ways, and a lot of exegetical water has passed under numerous hermeneutical bridges since then, but it still has something to teach us.

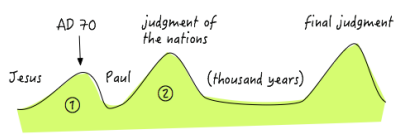
He does not do justice to the missional-evangelical and political-religious dynamics which I think fundamentally explain the shape and purpose of Paul's eschatology; and his insistence on using the term "mysticism" has probably been a stone of stumbling for many readers. But if we keep in mind that by mysticism he means the solidarity of the community of the Elect with Christ, who died and was raised, in the period leading up to the inauguration of the Messianic Kingdom, then this metaphor of the spider's web makes the point very well:

> As the spider's net is an admirably simple construction so long as it remains stretched between the threads which hold it in position, but becomes a hopeless tangle as soon as it is loosed from them; so the Pauline Mysticism is an admirably simple thing, so long as it is set in the framework of eschatology, but becomes a hopeless tangle as soon as it is cut loose from this. (140)

Schweitzer argues that both Paul and Jesus work with a two-stage scribal eschatology, evidenced in 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch: first, the beginning of the Messianic Kingdom, when the Son of Man comes on the clouds; then a final resurrection of all the dead and a final judgment. Soteriology and ecclesiology (salvation and church) cannot be understood apart from this narrative. Little is said about mission.



Jesus and Paul, however, have rather different perspectives on the first stage. In Schweitzer's view, Jesus had expected the Messianic Kingdom to come immediately after his death (1). Twenty or so years later it has become apparent that the *parousia* is delayed (2), so Paul has to develop a doctrine of redemption that will make sense within the new extended timescale. He "recast the doctrine of redemption in accordance with the facts, namely, that the Messiah is not only to appear in the future, but has already been present on earth in the conditions of human existence, and by His dying and rising again has made a first beginning of the resurrection of the dead" (115).



I have tried to give expression to the political-religious dynamic of New Testament eschatology and how Paul fits into it by means of the three horizons metaphor. It seems to me that by differentiating between the two horizons of judgment on Israel (1) and judgment on the idolatrous pagan nations (2), we partly explain the tension between Jesus and Paul. I don't think Paul is having to account for a delay so much as for a change of perspective.

The problem is not that the "end" that Jesus had in view has been delayed. If the end was a a war against Rome, there is nothing implausible about his prediction that the present generation of rebellious Israel would not pass away until all these things take place (Mk. 13:30). The problem is that as the apostles moved into the Greek-Roman world a new eschatological challenge presented itself: how much longer would the one creator God tolerate the pagan system and its associated misbehaviour (cf. Acts 14:6; 17:30)? Given the Old Testament pattern of judgment on Israel followed—perhaps much later—by judgment on the pagan enemy of Israel, it's easy to understand why a gap opened up between Jesus' horizon and the horizon of the early New Testament church.

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